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ABSTRACT

This ERIC/EECE Digest was adapted from a position paper of the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA). Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) organizations are important for their ability to meet the needs of: (1) consumers, for a single point of access that can help them understand their child care options; (2) child care providers, for training and support; and (3) local governments and agencies, for help in allocating resources. CCR&Rs have grown steadily since the 1970s. A few are housed in state agencies, but most are community-based organizations. Nearly half the states have statewide CCR&R organizations. Services provided by CCR&Rs include: (1) promoting consumer education and parental choice by giving parents detailed information about local child care programs and counseling parents about alternatives when services do not meet their needs; (2) assisting child care providers by offering training; (3) documenting trends and building the supply of child care services; and (4) leveraging resources through public-private partnerships. Information about NACCRRA and an employer-assisted child care information kit from the National Association for the Education of Young Children is provided. (BC)

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Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

Dan Bellm

The child care delivery system in the United States is entering a new era. Federal legislation enacted in 1990 offers the states a historic opportunity to develop new solutions to the shortage of high quality services for young children and their families. Careful planning will be especially critical in the coming years, since decisions made now may affect the child care system well into the next century.

A lack of coordination has frustrated many child care policy efforts in the past. The supply of child care services is, at best, a patchwork quilt: a fragmented and often confusing array of public and private programs, housed in a variety of settings, and frequently subject to eligibility guidelines that vary widely from one program to the next.

Child Care Resource and Referral: Identifying the Service

Everyone concerned about child care needs some form of assistance. Consumers need a single point of access that can help them make sense of all the options and match their needs with available services. Child care providers need reliable training, technical assistance and support to help them remain committed to their demanding but underrewarded profession. Local governments, employers, and community agencies need help in allocating resources to respond to shifting patterns of families' child care needs.

Child Care Resource & Referral organizations (CCR&Rs) are becoming increasingly important for their unique ability to meet all these needs. A CCR&R is designed to address the needs of both parents and child care providers. It helps parents make informed choices in selecting care and it helps develop and maintain high quality child care programs that are responsive to local needs. Locally based CCR&Rs offer a decentralized, personal approach to child care information, support, and resource-building. When CCR&Rs are the focal point, the effort to build a child care system is more cohesive, addressing the limits of the current patchwork while building on its diversity.

The Growth of CCR&R Services

CCR&Rs have grown steadily since the early 1970s. In 1980, there were about 60 CCR&Rs in the U.S.; today, there are over 300, as well as a National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA). Most CCR&Rs are supported by a combination of funding from city, county, or state budgets; federal dependent-care funds; businesses; corporate foundations; United Ways; universities; and charitable organizations. In some communities, CCR&Rs are still struggling to develop with only one committed volunteer.

A few CCR&Rs are housed in state or other public agencies. But most are community-based organizations that have been created by parents or child care advocates in response to local needs. Private, nonprofit CCR&Rs have the advantage of being able to attract funds from both the public and private sectors. Even in communities where CCR&R is part of a government body, its mandate is kept separate from regulatory functions such as child care licensing, so that the CCR&R will be able to offer impartial training and support.

Nearly half the states have statewide CCR&R organizations, which are often referred to as *networks*, and many other states are in the process of developing them. Networks of local or regional CCR&Rs can provide a structure that can be used to streamline the allocation of public and private funds and develop statewide training, recruitment, supply-building and other child care projects. A network can offer training and technical assistance to local CCR&Rs in order to build and maintain the quality of each agency's services. And perhaps most importantly, a statewide CCR&R network can create a uniform data collection system so that local CCR&Rs all collect comparable information about child care supply and demand.

What CCR&Rs Can Do

Promote consumer education and parental choice. One of the primary goals in national child care policy development is to enhance consumer education and parental choice—a mandate that accentuates the need for resource and referral services. Finding child care can be a formidable task. Parents often don't know where to turn for help and quickly become overwhelmed by high costs, varying quality, the confusing array of programs, and the shortage of openings.

A CCR&R is much more than a generic information and referral service. It gives parents detailed information about

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the full range of local child care programs and current openings and guidelines for public subsidies and other financial aid. Referral counselors offer parents personalized guidance about ways to find the care that is best for their children; what to look for in the programs they visit; and the quality of particular programs. Because CCR&Rs do not provide child care services themselves, they have no vested interest in promoting a particular form of care or care program; rather, they help parents clarify what they are looking for and inform them of options they may not have known about. CCR&Rs thus foster diversity and parental choice in the child care market. Many CCR&Rs provide printed materials about child care, hold parent education workshops, and maintain resource libraries. And CCR&Rs often manage voucher systems and other funding mechanisms that help parents meet child care costs.

When services don't meet parents' needs, CCR&Rs counsel them about alternatives—for example, ways to combine part-day programs, recruit in-home care, or create care-sharing arrangements with other parents. While CCR&Rs work to increase the supply of services, they also help parents cope with inadequacies in the present system. As states and communities seek new ways to assist underserved populations, CCR&Rs can be instrumental in documenting critical gaps in child care services—for example, a shortage of programs in a neighborhood where many families receive AFDC or need more infant care than they can afford or have access to.

An especially significant goal of CCR&R is universal access. CCR&R is one of the few services that can be made available to all families, without regard to income level or eligibility requirements. Many CCR&Rs strive to reflect the diversity of their communities by providing multilingual and multicultural counseling.

Assist child care providers. CCR&Rs enhance child care quality by offering training and technical assistance to providers and keeping programs informed about subsidies and other resources. This often involves helping with the development of new resources in the community. CCR&Rs help new providers get started, help services become more visible, and let programs know which services are in greatest demand. They develop new training models and encourage other education initiatives to design courses for child care providers. Since CCR&Rs generally do not have regulatory or supervisory function toward providers, they can offer this assistance in an impartial atmosphere of partnership.

Document trends and build the supply. Past efforts to document child care supply and demand have often been limited to one-time studies. In contrast, a resource and referral agency offers a continual source of child care data and can use what it learns daily from parents and providers to build the supply and improve the quality of child care services. CCR&Rs generate periodic reports about local child care supply and demand, including available services and costs, the ages of children needing care, and the neighborhoods where care is most often requested.

Many CCR&Rs have collaborated with school systems to develop before- and after-school child care programs; recruited providers who are willing to care for children whose parents work evening or weekend shifts; and worked with local zoning boards to allow child care programs to develop in neighborhoods where such land uses have been restricted.

Leverage resources through public-private partnerships. Many employers, unions, foundations and charitable organizations find that CCR&R agencies are an ideal intermediary through which to lend child care support. A CCR&R's professional expertise in child care, and its connections with parents and child care providers, make it a highly credible partner. Many CCR&Rs have developed contracts to provide enhanced referral services for employees. These services can include a special phone line, follow-up calls, other personalized support for parents, and parenting seminars at the workplace.

In order to promote private sector involvement, a core of state government support to CCR&R services is vital. Public sector leadership in supporting a CCR&R infrastructure allows business to invest in child care, particularly by facilitating the creation of public-private partnerships.

For More Information

More information about child care resource and referral agencies is available from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, or NACCRRA. (This ERIC/EECE Digest was adapted from a NACCRRA position paper, *Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies: Toward a Stronger Child Care System.*). You may contact NACCRRA at NACCRRA, 2116 Campus Drive SE, Rochester, MN 55904, or at (507) 287-2220.

See also the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Information Kit on Employer-Assisted Child Care* (2nd printing, 1990). For more information on the kit, call NAEYC at 1-800-424-2460.

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